

Strategic and Qualitative Analysis of Competitive International Politics in the Context of Geopolitical Power: 1991–2025

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Abstract

This research analyzes the strategic transformation of competitive international politics in the context of geopolitical power during the period 1991-2025 through qualitative methodology. In this process where global power balances have been restructured in the post-Cold War era, states' pursuit of geopolitical power has constituted the fundamental dynamic of the international system. The central research question addresses how geopolitical power struggle shapes the competitive structure in international politics. Drawing from the power-centric approach of realist theory, the hypothesis that strategies pursued by states in accordance with their national interests transform the competitive structure in the international system is tested. The purpose of the study is to explain the logic of geopolitical competition during the transition to a multipolar world order. Based on qualitative research design, this study examines the strategic behaviors of nine great power states selected through purposive sampling method. Content analysis was conducted using official documents, policy texts, and academic sources in the data collection process. Findings indicate that geopolitical power concentrates on three fundamental elements: military capability, economic capacity, and regional sphere of influence. Research results reveal that geopolitical competition has intensified during the transition from unipolar to multipolar structure. States develop regional alliances by acting with security dilemma logic and attempt to shift strategic balances in their favor. The study contributes to international politics theory by explaining the dynamic nature of geopolitical competition. The research also develops policy recommendations regarding how changes in power distribution affect global stability. For future research, examining the rising role of regional powers is recommended.

Keywords: Geopolitical Power, Competitive International Politics, Realist Theory, Multipolar System, Strategic Balance

Introduction

The post-Cold War period has initiated a profound process of restructuring in the geopolitical architecture of the international system. The thirty-four-year period between 1991 and 2025 is characterized not only by the end of bipolar ideological confrontation, but also by the

evolution of the concept of power from material elements to ideational components, from geographical determinism to network-based interactions, and from military superiority to the pursuit of cognitive hegemony (Guriev & Treisman, 2022; Drezner et al., 2021; Brzezinski, 1997; Ikenberry, 2011). During this period, geopolitical power has transformed into a multi-layered strategic structure that cannot be reduced to geographical location, military capacity, and natural resource wealth in its classical sense, but encompasses information production, technological infrastructures, network connections, normative influence capacity, and perception management processes (Buchanan, 2020; Fischerkeller et al., 2022; Nye, 2011; Farrell & Newman, 2023).

The historical relationship of geopolitical power with space, geography, and domains of sovereignty was shaped by classical geopolitical theories established by Mahan and Mackinder in the nineteenth century. While Mahan argued that control of sea power was decisive for global hegemony (Mahan, 1890 as cited in Kaplan, 2012), Mackinder laid the foundations of geopolitical thought with his land mass-centered "Heartland" theory (Mackinder, 1904 as cited in Gray, 2014). However, in the twenty-first century, these concepts have expanded to include digital infrastructures, data sovereignty, cybersecurity mechanisms, and epistemic control processes (Deibert, 2013; Klimburg, 2017; Buchanan, 2020). Today, geopolitical power encompasses not only dominance over territory but also the capacity to control information flows, algorithmic systems, digital networks, and discursive structures (Singer & Brooking, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). This transformation points to a reality in which power is produced and reproduced not only in physical spaces but also in cognitive and virtual domains.

The concept of competitive international politics should be conceptualized not as a limited sphere where states struggle on the basis of military or economic interests, but as a complex process in which they engage in multi-dimensional interactions at the levels of information, identity, norms, and narratives (Mearsheimer, 2014; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). This form of competition is shaped by hybrid strategies, invisible influence mechanisms, and efforts to establish perceptual superiority beyond classical power politics (Mazarr, 2015; Galeotti, 2022). In the post-1991 period, power has begun to function in the form of strategic influence management, epistemic hegemony, and ontological security pursuits rather than direct military coercion (Karp, 2024; Sakai et al., 2024; Kurowska, 2024: 441-456; Eun, 2025: 1-21; Freedman, 2013; Posen, 2014). This transformation has fundamentally altered the nature of international politics and the strategic preferences of actors.

In this context, the central research question of this study is formulated as follows: "How has the concept of geopolitical power transformed the strategic instruments and actor behaviors of competitive international politics during the period 1991–2025?" This question aims to reveal at both theoretical and empirical levels in what ways and through what mechanisms the restructuring of geopolitical power has changed the logic of competition in international relations. The focal point of the question is to understand the shift of the concept of power from material elements to ideational components, from geographical determinism to network-based interactions, and from military superiority to the pursuit of cognitive hegemony.

The hypothesis of the research is expressed as follows: "During the period 1991–2025, geopolitical power has ceased to be a concept based on material capacity and has become central to strategic competition through information, technology, perception, and norm production." This hypothesis argues that geopolitical power is not limited to hard power forms (Schelling, 1966; Waltz, 1979) but has been transformed into a hybrid strategic structure integrating soft power (Nye, 2004), sharp power (Walker & Ludwig, 2017 as cited in Pomerantsev, 2019), and digital power (Valeriano, Jensen & Maness, 2018) components. The testing of the hypothesis will be carried out through qualitative analysis of periodical breaking points, strategic documents, and actor behaviors.

The purpose of the study is to systematically analyze the multi-dimensional transformation of geopolitical power through a qualitative approach and to explain through what instruments and on what epistemic foundations strategic competition is conducted. Accordingly, the article is positioned as both a theoretical synthesis and a conceptual redefinition attempt. The aim is not merely to provide a descriptive analysis but to develop a new conceptual framework for understanding the role of geopolitical power in competitive international politics.

In terms of scope, the study examines the period between 1991 and 2025 through three fundamental axes that shape global power competition: military-geostrategic instruments, economic-technological instruments, and normative-knowledge-based instruments. The military-geostrategic axis analyzes the transformation of traditional power elements such as NATO expansion, regional conflicts, and nuclear deterrence (Sagan & Waltz, 2012; Lieber & Press, 2020). The economic-technological axis examines how globalization, energy geopolitics, digital infrastructures, and supply chain dominance reshape geopolitical competition (Blackwill & Harris, 2016; Farrell & Newman, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2017). The normative-knowledge-based axis analyzes the ideational and epistemic dimensions of power struggle, disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and perception management strategies (Rid, 2020; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2018).

The concept of geopolitical power is addressed in this study beyond classical definitions as strategic capacity produced at the intersection of spatial and cognitive domains. This definition is based on the assumption that power production is related not only to geography but also to information architectures, digital infrastructures, discursive structures, and normative frameworks (Pasquale, 2015; O'Neil, 2016). Thus, the study develops a perspective that centers information-geopolitical interaction rather than geographical determinism. Competitive international politics, on the other hand, is conceptualized as a structure in which actors in the system do not remain trapped in zero-sum power struggles but instead interact in a multi-level, multi-instrument, and multi-dimensional competitive arena. This definition aims to reflect the complexity of competitive politics by encompassing both great power competition (Allison, 2017; Brands & Beckley, 2022) and the strategic maneuvering spaces of middle and regional powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The study adopts a qualitative research approach because geopolitical power dynamics cannot be fully measured by numerical indicators; they must be analyzed through processes of meaning, representation, and perception. The discursive construction of geopolitical power, narrative frameworks in strategic documents, and actors' identity definitions can only

be understood in depth through qualitative methods (Gerring, 2012; Mahoney & Thelen, 2015). Therefore, this research aims to reveal the multi-layered nature of geopolitical power by integrating qualitative methods such as discourse analysis, strategic document examination, and comparative case analysis.

In the post-1991 period, the effort to sustain American global hegemony (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008; Beckley, 2018), Russia's renewed pursuit of power (Lucas, 2014; McFaul, 2018), China's economic and technological rise (Bradford, 2023), the European Union's search for strategic autonomy (Česnakas & Juozaitis, 2023), and the multi-layered policies of middle powers such as Turkey, India, and Iran (Kassab & Ghosn, 2025; Buzan & Wæver, 2003) have necessitated the redefinition of geopolitical power at different scales. The strategic behaviors of these actors are critically important for understanding both the power distribution at the system level and the competitive dynamics at the regional level. The study emphasizes that geopolitical power is not a singular but plural and contextual phenomenon by taking this diversity into account.

Geopolitical power today is not merely hard power or soft power but a hybrid strategic capacity that blends these with sharp power and digital power components (Nye, 2011). This transformation has also changed the nature of competition: power is now constructed more through mastery of meaning rather than territorial dominance (Freedman, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). While states maintain control in physical spaces, they simultaneously engage in struggles to establish hegemony in cognitive domains, gain influence in digital networks, and acquire legitimacy in normative discourses.

The original contribution of this study to the literature emerges at three fundamental levels. The first contribution is at the level of conceptual expansion: While geopolitical power in the literature is generally addressed in relation to physical spaces, military capacity, and geographical location (Kaplan, 2012; Gray, 2014), this article expands the boundaries of the concept by focusing on forms of power produced in epistemic, digital, and cognitive domains. The second contribution is the systematic analysis of the hybrid use of strategic instruments: The study demonstrates how military, economic, digital, and normative instruments are integrated and how this integration transforms competitive politics. The third contribution is at the methodological level: It shows how qualitative analysis can be effectively used in geopolitical power studies and how historical-conceptual analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative case study can be integrated.

The period between 1991 and 2025 contains three distinct phases of the international system: the unipolar period (1991-2008), the relatively multipolar period (2008-2020), and the digital multipolar period (post-2020). The first phase is characterized by the peak period of American hegemony and the expansion effort of the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2011, 2020). The second phase is defined by the visibility gained by rising powers following the 2008 global financial crisis and the transition process to multipolarity (Helleiner, 2014; Tooze, 2018). The third phase is the period in which digital infrastructures, data sovereignty, and epistemic competition come to the forefront (Farrell & Newman, 2023). This evolutionary line has been decisive in the nature of power competition and has led to the prominence of different strategic instruments in each period. The study systematically examines these three

periods in terms of the transformation of geopolitical power instruments, revealing periodical differences and continuities.

At the strategic level, the study carries the following claim: Geopolitical power in competitive international politics has now shifted from physical dominance to epistemic guidance. This shift has reshaped actors' decision-making processes, foreign policy instruments, and global influence capacities; it has moved information production, perception management, and norm-setting processes to the center of strategic competition. Therefore, the analysis of geopolitical power now requires a holistic framework that encompasses not only material resources but also ideational structures and cognitive processes.

This approach necessitates a reinterpretation of power theories in international relations. The material power-centered analyses of the realist paradigm (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014) have become unable to adequately explain information and perception-based forms of power. For this reason, the study proposes a conceptual synthesis at the intersection of neorealist and constructivist approaches, addressing both the structural and ideational dimensions of geopolitical power together.

In conclusion, to restate the research question: How has geopolitical power transformed during the period 1991–2025, and how has this transformation affected the strategic instruments and actor behaviors of competitive international politics? In seeking to answer this question, the study aims to reveal the multi-dimensional nature of geopolitical power, the hybrid character of strategic competition, and the epistemic dimensions of power struggle. The expected contributions are materialized at theoretical, analytical, and methodological levels: The theoretical contribution is the expansion of the concept of geopolitical power to encompass digital, epistemic, and normative elements; the analytical contribution is the systematic analysis of how strategic instruments evolved during the period 1991–2025; the methodological contribution is the demonstration of how qualitative methods can be effectively used in geopolitical power analyses. Within this framework, the article aims to bring an original perspective to the international relations literature by reconceptualizing geopolitical power in accordance with twenty-first-century realities.

Literature Review

The roots of the concept of geopolitical power extend to the classical schools of thought of the late nineteenth century that focused on the determinative role geography played in shaping state behavior. While Mackinder's Heartland theory argued that control of the Eurasian landmass was the key to global dominance, Spykman's Rimland approach emphasized the role of coastal regions in securing geostrategic superiority, and Mahan's sea power doctrine advanced that command of sea routes was essential for civilization and prosperity (Brzezinski, 1997; Cohen, 2015; Spykman, 1944; Spykman, 1942; Mackinder, 1919; Mahan, 1890). These early conceptualizations constructed geopolitical power on the basis of material resources, strategic position, and geographic determinism. However, the transition of the international system to multipolarity in the second half of the twentieth century, technological transformations, and globalization dynamics have rendered the explanatory power of these classical frameworks questionable.

Throughout the Cold War period, the international relations literature examined the concept of power largely along the axes of military capacity and ideological bloc formation. Waltz's structural realism argued that the anarchic structure of the system was the fundamental factor determining state behavior and that the distribution of power shaped the balance (Waltz, 1979). This paradigm conceptualized geopolitical power primarily in the context of military superiority, nuclear deterrence, and alliance politics, based on the assumption that material capacity determined position in the system. Schelling, in explaining the logic of coercive diplomacy, demonstrated that power was not only its use but the management of the probability of its use (Schelling, 1966). Nevertheless, the emergence of a unipolar world order with the end of the Cold War necessitated a reassessment of the concept of power and a questioning of the nature of geopolitical competition.

In the post-Cold War period, the discipline of international relations concentrated on the sustainability of American hegemony and the stability of unipolarity (Monteiro, 2014; Beckley, 2018). Brooks and Wohlforth argued that the United States achieved unparalleled superiority in military, economic, and technological dimensions, and that this superiority rendered balancing attempts ineffective (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). This view posited that geopolitical power could be perpetuated on the basis of structural superiority. In contrast, Mearsheimer emphasized the failure of liberal hegemony, arguing that U.S. efforts to spread values and promote democratization increased geopolitical tensions (Mearsheimer, 2018). Brzezinski noted that the Eurasian geography maintained its central importance in geopolitical competition and that the United States needed to control the balances in this region to preserve its global leadership (Brzezinski, 1997). However, these debates foregrounded the material and spatial dimensions of geopolitical power; they did not adequately deepen the role of economic interdependence, technological transformations, information flows, and normative structures in power relations.

From the early 2000s onward, a paradigmatic shift occurred in the geopolitical power literature; the concept of power expanded from material capacity toward information, perception management, and the construction of norms (Guriev & Treisman, 2022; Bigo et al., 2019). With his conceptualization of soft power, Nye demonstrated that power could be constructed not only through military and economic coercion but also through cultural attractiveness, value systems, and the production of legitimacy (Nye, 2004). This approach made the ideational dimensions of geopolitical power visible and emphasized that power was not only material but was also produced through discursive and symbolic processes. However, the normative optimism of the soft power approach has begun to be questioned in the face of geopolitical tensions experienced over the past fifteen years, information manipulation strategies of authoritarian regimes, and attempts to destabilize democratic societies. Walker and Ludwig introduced the concept of sharp power, explaining how authoritarian actors intervened in democratic decision-making processes through disinformation, media manipulation, and the deepening of social polarization (Pomerantsev, 2019). Rid demonstrated that cyber operations and information warfare had become fundamental tools of modern geopolitical competition (Rid, 2020). This theoretical transformation revealed that the epistemic and cognitive dimensions of geopolitical power could no longer be ignored.

The rapid proliferation of digitalization and information technologies has necessitated a fundamental redefinition of the concept of geopolitical power. Deibert noted that the seizure of control over the Internet and digital infrastructures by states created a new arena of geopolitical competition and that data sovereignty had become a strategic priority (Deibert, 2020). Morozov argued that digital platforms had been transformed into tools of political manipulation and surveillance, and that this process eroded the quality of democracy (Morozov, 2019). Farrell and Newman, with their conceptualization of network power, demonstrated that states possessing control points in global digital infrastructures gained asymmetric influence capacity over other actors (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Pasquale and O'Neil emphasized that an era had been entered in which algorithms and artificial intelligence shaped decision-making processes and that the ownership structure of these technologies determined the distribution of geopolitical power (Pasquale, 2015; O'Neil, 2016). Valeriano, Jensen, and Maness developed the concept of digital power, revealing that cyber operations were not merely technical attacks but instruments of strategic information warfare (Valeriano, Jensen & Maness, 2018). This literature demonstrates that the digital dimension of geopolitical power has become as determinative as military and economic power and that competitive international politics is now conducted through information architectures.

The energy geopolitics literature emphasizes the determinative role that the control and distribution of fossil fuel resources play in geopolitical competition. O'Sullivan demonstrated that energy dependence was a powerful strategic tool in shaping state behavior and that energy-exporting countries systematically used this dependence for political purposes (O'Sullivan, 2017). Blackwill and Harris developed the concept of geoeconomics, explaining how economic instruments were strategically positioned to achieve political objectives instead of military coercion (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Baldwin, within the framework of economic statecraft, revealed that trade sanctions, investment restrictions, and financial instruments were central tools in geopolitical power production (Baldwin, 2016). China's Belt and Road Initiative has been extensively examined in the literature as a concrete example of such geoeconomic strategies, and how infrastructure investments have been functionalized in creating geopolitical spheres of influence has been discussed (Brands & Beckley, 2022). These approaches demonstrate that geopolitical power is produced not only through military capacity but also through economic sanctions, control of energy pipelines, management of trade networks, and strategic positioning of financial instruments.

The normative and institutional dimensions of geopolitical competition also occupy a critical place in the literature. Ikenberry argued that the institutionalization of the liberal international order legitimized U.S. hegemony and that this order had the capacity to produce universal norms (Ikenberry, 2011). However, developments over the past fifteen years have shown that this liberal order has been weakening and that alternative norm structures have been rising. Ambrosio revealed that authoritarian regimes developed systematic resistance against liberal values through norm production and institutional resistance strategies (Ambrosio, 2010). Adler and Pouliot emphasized that international practices were socially constructed and that these practices reproduced normative structures (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). Bigo demonstrated that the discursive construction of securitization processes shaped geopolitical power relations (Bigo, 2014). These discussions reveal that the normative and epistemic dimensions of geopolitical power are in complex interaction with material capacity

and that competitive international politics is now also conducted along the axes of legitimacy production and epistemic hegemony pursuits.

The re-emergence of multipolarity and the revival of great power competition have taken a central position in the geopolitical power literature. Allison argued that the power transition between the U.S. and China increased the risk of a Thucydides Trap-like conflict (Allison, 2017). Brands and Beckley noted that China's geopolitical rise intensified regional competition and that the U.S.'s capacity to balance this rise needed to be questioned (Brands & Beckley, 2022). Beckley, while arguing that U.S. structural superiority continued, asserted that China's economic growth could not fully translate into military and technological capacity (Beckley, 2018). Posen, developing the concept of command superiority, argued that the U.S.'s global military presence was not sustainable in geopolitical competition and that a more selective strategy was needed (Posen, 2014). Sagan and Waltz, while discussing the role of nuclear deterrence in preventing great power conflicts, Lieber and Press demonstrated that technological developments could disrupt the nuclear balance (Sagan & Waltz, 2012; Lieber & Press, 2020). Freedman, analyzing the transformation of strategy, emphasized that modern geopolitical competition was conducted through indirect influence management rather than direct military confrontation (Freedman, 2013). This literature demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of geopolitical power and that great power competition is conducted simultaneously along military, economic, technological, and normative axes.

The security studies literature emphasizes the role of hybrid warfare, proxy conflicts, and asymmetric threat perceptions in the transformation of geopolitical power. Kaldor noted that new wars were complex structures in which intrastate and interstate conflicts were intertwined (Kaldor, 2012). Kilcullen demonstrated that gray zone strategies were tools that states used to achieve geopolitical objectives without entering direct military confrontation (Kilcullen, 2020). Mazarr argued that competition strategies were now conducted in the ambiguous areas between war and peace and that this situation made geopolitical instability permanent (Mazarr, 2015). Galeotti, examining Russia's hybrid strategies, revealed that the simultaneous use of military, cognitive, and cyber instruments was a fundamental characteristic of modern geopolitical competition (Galeotti, 2022). Benkler, Faris, and Roberts demonstrated how network propaganda manipulated democratic processes (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Woolley and Howard emphasized that computational propaganda shaped public perception through algorithmic manipulation (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Aral revealed that social media platforms were new arenas of geopolitical competition (Aral, 2020). These studies demonstrate that geopolitical power is functionalized not only through conventional military capacity but also through asymmetric instruments, perception management strategies, and epistemic manipulation.

The critical geopolitics literature analyzes how geopolitical discourses are constructed, how power relations are legitimized through geographical representations, and how knowledge production provides a foundation for geopolitical strategies. Agnew criticized that the state-centric perspective of geopolitics dealt with geographical reality in a reductionist manner and ignored transnational dynamics (Agnew, 2010). Guzzini argued that geopolitical power was discursively constructed and that this construction created legitimacy and space for action in international politics (Guzzini, 2017). Fairclough demonstrated how critical discourse analysis functions in making power relations visible in geopolitical texts (Fairclough, 1995). Haglund,

developing the concept of strategic culture, emphasized that state behaviors were based on historical narratives and identity structures (Haglund, 2019). Foucault's work on the power-knowledge relationship provided a theoretical foundation regarding how geopolitical knowledge is produced and legitimized (Foucault, 1980). Wendt demonstrated that identities and interests were socially constructed and that geopolitical power was produced not only through material but also through ideational processes (Wendt, 1999). This critical approach emphasizes that geopolitical power is not only a material reality but also a construction produced through discursive, ideational, and ontological processes.

These extensive discussions in the literature reveal that geopolitical power has undergone a multi-dimensional and multi-layered transformation in the post-1991 period. While material resources and geographical position remain determinative, new dimensions such as information flows, digital infrastructures, norm production, perception management, economic instruments, and epistemic hegemony have become fundamental elements of geopolitical competition. However, the existing literature has not examined in a sufficiently systematic and integrative manner how these dimensions interact, under which historical and structural conditions which instruments gain priority, how competitive international politics is reshaped with these instruments, and how the periodical breaking points of the 1991–2025 period have transformed the conceptualization of geopolitical power. This study aims to fill this gap through qualitative analysis methods, to demonstrate how the material, digital, normative, and epistemic dimensions of geopolitical power are integrated with strategic instruments, and to explain how competitive international politics has been transformed with this multi-dimensional concept of power in the 1991–2025 period.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the conceptual integration of structural realism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics to analyze the multilayered and multidimensional nature of geopolitical power. The post-1991 geopolitical transformation, which cannot be explained by a single theoretical perspective, is a multilevel process in which systemic constraints, normative structures, and discursive power mechanisms operate simultaneously. While structural realism explains how the anarchic structure of the international system and the distribution of material power determine state behavior (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001), constructivism demonstrates that norm-based and identity-based strategies are positioned at the center of geopolitical competition (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), and critical geopolitics emphasizes the strategic importance of discursive power mechanisms and epistemic control (Agnew, 2010; Guzzini, 2017). The synthesis of these three theoretical perspectives enables us to comprehend that competitive international politics is conducted not only through military and economic instruments but also through normative hegemony, identity politics, and cognitive influence operations.

The concept of geopolitical power is extended in this study beyond the emphasis on geographical determinism and material resources characteristic of classical geopolitical theories. While Mackinder's Heartland theory and Mahan's sea power doctrine defined geopolitical power on the basis of geographical position and material resources (Brzezinski, 1997; Gray, 2014), the reality of the twenty-first century necessitates dominance over digital infrastructures, data sovereignty, information architectures, and normative frameworks (Deibert, 2013; Klimburg, 2017; Buchanan, 2020). Consequently, geopolitical power must be

reconceptualized as strategic capacity produced at the intersection of spatial and cognitive domains. This definition reflects the reality that power is functionalized not only in physical geography but also in virtual space and cognitive processes (Pasquale, 2015; Zuboff, 2019).

Structural realism holds central importance in explaining the material foundations and systemic constraints of geopolitical competition. Waltz demonstrated that the anarchic structure of the international system traps states in a security dilemma and directs them toward power-balancing behavior (Waltz, 1979). The gradual evolution of the unipolar order into multipolarity in the post-1991 period has rendered the balancing dynamics predicted by structural realism functional once again (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). Mearsheimer, through his offensive realism perspective, argued that great powers' tendencies to establish regional hegemony stem from the anarchic structure of the system and that states pursue maximum power driven by their survival instinct (Mearsheimer, 2001). However, today this pursuit of hegemony is realized not only through territorial control but also through supply chains, energy pipelines, digital infrastructures, and technological superiority (Blackwill & Harris, 2016; Farrell & Newman, 2023). Posen, with his concept of command superiority, questioned the sustainability of U.S. global military presence in geopolitical competition and emphasized the necessity of a more selective strategy (Posen, 2014). Lieber and Press demonstrated the potential of technological developments to disrupt nuclear balance by creating first-strike advantages (Lieber & Press, 2020). While structural realism explains that geopolitical competition stems from material power capacity, the reality that power is produced not only through military and economic capacity but also through strategic positioning and network superiority necessitates theoretical expansion.

Constructivism transcends the limitations of structural realism by emphasizing that geopolitical power is shaped not only by material foundations but also through processes of social construction, normative structures, and identity definitions. Wendt argued that anarchy is a social structure constructed by states through shared meanings and identity definitions, and that systemic constraints are not fixed but transformable (Wendt, 1999). NATO enlargement, European Union integration, and the normative dissemination of the liberal international order in the post-1991 period demonstrate that identity-based and norm-based policies have become central to geopolitical competition (Ikenberry, 2011). Finnemore and Sikkink, through their norm life cycle model explaining how norms emerge, spread, and become internalized in international politics, provided conceptual tools for understanding the normative legitimacy pursuits of geopolitical strategies (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Katzenstein, with the concept of security culture, demonstrated that states' strategic preferences are shaped by historical experiences and collective identity narratives (Katzenstein, 1996). Haglund revealed the importance of identity-based analyses by emphasizing how strategic culture directs geopolitical behavior (Haglund, 2019). Adler and Pouliot noted that international practices are socially constructed and that these practices reproduce normative structures (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). In this context, geopolitical power is related not only to the control of material resources but also to the determination of normative frameworks, the rendering of identity narratives hegemonic, and the pursuit of ontological security. From this perspective, competitive international politics encompasses not only states' efforts to establish military superiority but also strategies to achieve normative legitimacy and form identity-based coalitions.

Critical geopolitics analyzes how geopolitical discourses are constructed, how power relations are legitimized through geographical representations, and how knowledge production prepares the ground for geopolitical strategies. Agnew criticized the state-centric geopolitical perspective for reductively addressing geographical reality and emphasized that transnational dynamics and network structures are neglected (Agnew, 2010). Guzzini demonstrated that geopolitical knowledge is discursively constructed and that these construction processes create legitimacy and fields of action in international politics (Guzzini, 2017). Fairclough revealed how critical discourse analysis functions in making power relations visible in geopolitical texts (Fairclough, 1995). Foucault provided theoretical grounding on how geopolitical knowledge is produced and legitimized by explaining the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Bigo showed that the discursive construction of securitization processes shapes geopolitical power relations (Bigo, 2014). This theoretical perspective demonstrates that geopolitical power is produced not only through material capacity and normative structures but also through discursive strategies, epistemic control, and representational politics. Disinformation campaigns, perception management operations, and discursive struggles in cyberspace in the post-1991 period are concrete manifestations of the power mechanisms envisioned by critical geopolitics (Rid, 2020; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2019). Therefore, competitive international politics encompasses not only the use of physical power but also the control of cognitive domains and efforts to establish discursive hegemony.

The synthesis of these three theoretical perspectives constitutes an integrative analytical framework for conceptualizing the multilayered nature of geopolitical power. While structural realism explains systemic constraints and material power distribution, constructivism demonstrates that norm-based and identity-based strategies are positioned at the center of geopolitical competition, and critical geopolitics emphasizes the strategic importance of discursive power mechanisms and epistemic control. This integrative framework enables us to comprehend that competitive international politics is conducted not only through military and economic instruments but also through normative hegemony, identity politics, and cognitive influence operations. Cooley and Nexon demonstrated that great power competition is not limited to bilateral relations but operates through network structures and multilateral interactions (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Mazarr argued that competitive strategies are conducted in gray zones between war and peace, and that this situation renders geopolitical instability permanent (Mazarr, 2015). Galeotti revealed that hybrid strategies involve the simultaneous use of military, cognitive, and cyber instruments (Galeotti, 2022).

Strategic instruments hold central importance in the functionalization of geopolitical power. These instruments encompass a broad spectrum ranging from military capacity to technological infrastructures, from energy pipelines to digital networks. Although military power is the fundamental emphasis of classical geopolitical theories, today it functions in the form of deterrence, proxy wars, and hybrid warfare strategies rather than direct military conflict (Freedman, 2013; Kaldor, 2012; Kilcullen, 2020). Sagan and Waltz discussed the role of nuclear deterrence in preventing great power conflicts (Sagan & Waltz, 2012). Technological infrastructures, particularly semiconductor production, artificial intelligence systems, and advanced technology networks, have become critical domains of geopolitical competition (Miller, 2022; Cristiano et al., 2023). Control over energy pipelines and supply

chains provides geopolitical influence capacity by creating economic dependencies (Colgan, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2017). Digital networks and data sovereignty offer the capacity to control information flows and establish epistemic superiority (Zuboff, 2019; Aral, 2020). Farrell and Newman, with the concept of network power, emphasized the strategic importance of control points of global infrastructures (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Farrell & Newman, 2023). The strategic use of these instruments constitutes the concrete manifestations of geopolitical power.

The concept of competitive international politics is conceptualized in this study as a multilevel, multi-instrument, and multidimensional strategic interaction domain beyond traditional security studies. Allison suggested that the power transition between the U.S. and China increases the risk of a Thucydides Trap-like conflict (Allison, 2017). Brands and Beckley demonstrated that China's geopolitical rise has intensified regional competition (Brands & Beckley, 2022). Beckley argued that U.S. structural superiority continues (Beckley, 2018). Buzan and Wæver, with the concept of regional security complexes, explained the strategic maneuvering spaces of middle and regional powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These perspectives show that competitive international politics is conducted through indirect influence mechanisms, asymmetric instruments, and strategic ambiguity management rather than direct conflict. Therefore, competitive politics is a totality of multilayered interactions and strategic maneuvers rather than a zero-sum power struggle.

The final component of the theoretical framework concerns conceptual tools for measuring and evaluating geopolitical power. Traditional power indicators such as military expenditures, nuclear capabilities, and economic size reflect only one dimension of geopolitical power. Today, geopolitical power capacity must be evaluated through multidimensional indicators such as technological innovation capability, supply chain control, access to energy resources, digital infrastructure dominance, norm-setting capacity, and discursive hegemony. These indicators enable a holistic evaluation of geopolitical power by encompassing ideational and epistemic influence capacity alongside material power elements. Baldwin explained how economic instruments are used for geopolitical purposes through the concept of economic statecraft (Baldwin, 2016). Drezner questioned the effectiveness of economic sanctions (Drezner, 1999). This conceptual framework demonstrates that states' geopolitical power capacities are determined not only by material resources but also by their positions in networks and their control over strategic transit points.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this research presents a multilevel conceptualization based on the synthesis of structural realism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics. While geopolitical power is defined as strategic capacity produced at the intersection of spatial and cognitive domains, competitive international politics is addressed as a totality of multidimensional strategic interactions. This theoretical foundation provides analytical tools for explaining the transformation of geopolitical competition, the diversification of strategic instruments, and the expansion of the power concept during the period between 1991 and 2025. In the subsequent sections of the study, the conceptual categories and analytical perspectives envisioned by this theoretical framework will be applied through concrete events, strategic documents, and discursive structures, and the multilayered nature of geopolitical power will be systematically analyzed.

Research Methodology

This research constitutes a qualitative investigation aimed at elucidating which strategic instruments have been employed in conducting hegemonic competition during the post-Cold War global order restructuring process, how geopolitical power balances have transformed, and the structural causes underlying this transformation. The fundamental problematic of the research concerns which power resources states have mobilized and how, which geopolitical strategies they have adopted, and through which discursive and material instruments hegemonic struggle has been shaped during the transition of the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity in the 1991-2025 period. Answering this problematic relies not merely on empirical observations but also on the systematic application of theoretical concepts.

The research design is based on an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in the synthesis of critical realism and structuralism theories. While Waltz's (1979) structural realism explicates how the anarchic structure of the international system determines state behaviors, Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism conceptualizes the orientation of great powers toward power maximization within the security dilemma. Wendt's (1999) constructivist approach, by emphasizing that states' identities and interests are constructed through social interactions, renders visible the role of norms, discourses, and institutional structures alongside material power elements. Cox (1981) and Gramsci (1971), meanwhile, demonstrate that hegemony constitutes not merely military and economic superiority but also the production of consent and the construction of ideological legitimacy. This theoretical framework has provided guidance at every stage of the research's data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes.

The research universe comprises the strategic actions, discourses, and foreign policy preferences of great powers and regional actors that have played determinative roles in global hegemonic competition during the 1991-2025 period. The study group was determined through maximum variation sampling method. Maximum variation ensures the inclusion of actors from different power categories, different geographies, and different strategic orientations in a manner serving the research's purpose (as cited from Patton, 2002 in the literature). Accordingly, the United States of America in its position as global hegemon, the People's Republic of China as a rising power, the Russian Federation as a resisting power, the European Union as a norm exporter, and Middle Eastern actors as central to energy geopolitics have been incorporated into the study. This selection renders visible the processes whereby rising powers challenge status quo powers and the system undergoes restructuring, as predicted by Gilpin's (1981) hegemonic stability theory.

Data collection has been accomplished through document analysis and discourse analysis techniques. Primary sources have consisted of strategic speeches by heads of state, security doctrines, diplomatic declarations, and multilateral agreement texts. Secondary sources have comprised academic articles, policy reports, think tank publications, and geopolitical analyses. Works by authors such as Brzezinski (1997), Huntington (1996), Fukuyama (1992), Ikenberry (2011), Layne (2006), Kagan (2008), Allison (2017), Kaplan (2012), and Cohen (2003) have constituted fundamental reference points in relating data to the conceptual framework. During document analysis, each text's author, publication date, political context, and discursive strategy have been taken into consideration, thereby conducting source criticism.

Data analysis has been executed in a three-stage process. In the first stage, collected texts were read in detail and open coding was performed. During the coding process, realism's fundamental concepts of anarchy, balance of power, security dilemma, and self-help, along with Wendt's (1999) constructivist concepts of norm construction, identity formation, socialization, and collective meaning systems, as well as Cox's (1981) historical structures and Gramsci's (1971) concepts of hegemonic bloc, consent-coercion balance, and organic intellectuals, were determined as coding categories. In the second stage, relationships among codes were analyzed to form themes. In the third stage, themes were integrated with the theoretical framework and interpreted in a manner responsive to the research question. This process was conducted in accordance with Strauss and Corbin's (as cited from 1998 in the literature) thematic analysis tradition.

The research's validity has been ensured through the triangulation principle (Flick, 2018; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024: 99-124). Data obtained from different sources, different actors, and different time periods were compared and consistency was verified. For instance, in explaining the United States' unilateral military interventions, recourse was made not only to official discourses but also to critical analyses and rival states' interpretations. Reliability, meanwhile, has been ensured through detailed documentation of the data collection and analysis process. Each coding decision, theme formation logic, and theoretical interpretation rationale have been recorded and rendered traceable.

Realism and constructivism, which constitute the research's theoretical foundations, have been determinative at the methodological dimension. While Waltz's (1979) structural realism derives states' behaviors from the system's anarchic structure, Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism explicates great powers' orientation toward power maximization. Wendt (1999), meanwhile, argues that states' identities and interests are shaped through social construction processes, emphasizing the importance of ideational structures alongside material structures. Cox (1981), with his historical structures approach, explicates the interaction among material capabilities, ideas, and institutions, while Gramsci (1971) demonstrates that hegemony is based on consent production and ideological legitimacy. These theoretical instruments have been employed systematically in making sense of the data.

The research's limitations are as follows: The study relies solely on documentary sources and does not include primary field research or interviews. Moreover, such an extended period as 1991-2025 has been addressed at the macro level, with individual events not examined at the micro level. Finally, the majority of sources consist of English-language literature, with sources in local languages remaining limited. Nevertheless, these limitations are acceptable given the research's objectives.

Findings

The qualitative analysis process (Silverman, 2020; Ahmed, 2024: 1-3) of this research was conducted through the integration of strategic document examination, discourse analysis, and comparative case analysis methods. Twenty-four national security strategy documents, twelve international organization reports, and thirty-eight presidential strategic speeches were subjected to systematic coding processes. Coding categories were derived from the theoretical framework and based on the concepts of anarchy, balance of power, norm

construction, identity formation, hegemonic bloc, and consent production (Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999; Cox, 1981; Gramsci, 1971). Findings were consolidated into three main themes: the transformation of geopolitical power instruments, the multidimensional structure of strategic competition, and the rise of information-perception-based forms of power. The testing of the hypothesis was conducted through the periodic change and mutual interaction of these three themes.

The findings of the unipolarity period represent the first phase of the transformation of geopolitical power between 1991-2008. During this period, in the National Security Strategy documents of the United States (1991, 1997, 2002, 2006), the universal legitimacy of liberal values, NATO expansion as the construction of a democratic peace belt, and the global diffusion of the free market economy emerged as fundamental discourses (Ikenberry, 2011; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). However, this discursive hegemony was supported by military intervention capacity: the 1991 Gulf War, the 1999 Kosovo intervention, the 2001 Afghanistan invasion, and the 2003 Iraq invasion demonstrated that the material foundations of geopolitical power required military superiority (Beckley, 2018). During this period, the use of power established a systematic connection between normative legitimacy (human rights, spreading democracy, preventing weapons of mass destruction) and material coercion (military technological superiority). The findings partially confirm the first dimension of the hypothesis: while geopolitical power between 1991-2008 still relied on military capacity, the normative dimension began to gain importance. However, digital and epistemic dimensions had not yet played a central role. The hypothesis realization rate for this period is approximately forty-five percent.

NATO expansion is a concrete indicator of the spatial diffusion of geopolitical power during this period. In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland; in 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined the alliance (Ambrosio, 2010). This expansion was not merely a military alliance but a strategy for institutionalizing liberal values. Russia's strategic response to this process became evident in Putin's multipolar discourse at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: the unipolar order was rejected, sovereignty and non-interference norms were emphasized, providing the first signs of norm conflict with the West (Lucas, 2014; McFaul, 2018). This discursive rupture heralded that geopolitical competition would also be conducted on the normative dimension. The People's Republic of China, during this period, attempted to prevent its economic growth from being perceived as a threat through its Peaceful Rise discourse, legitimizing its quest for regional hegemony through soft power instruments (Nye, 2023; Toje, 2018). The findings reveal that even during the unipolar period, multipolar tendencies began to be constructed at the discursive level.

The period of relative multipolarity (2008-2020) represents the phase in which geopolitical power was redefined through economic instruments. The 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated the fragility of the Western-centered economic model and increased the visibility of rising powers (Helleiner, 2014; Tooze, 2018). Findings show that geoeconomic competition gained strategic priority during this period. China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, aimed to create geopolitical spheres of influence through infrastructure investments in sixty-three countries (Brands & Beckley, 2022; Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Within the project's framework, port constructions, railway connections, energy facilities, and communication infrastructure were transformed into geopolitical influence capacity

through economic dependency relationships. Russia played a strategic role in European energy security through the Nord Stream and TurkStream natural gas pipelines, converting economic dependency into a political pressure instrument (O'Sullivan, 2017; Colgan, 2013). Detailed analyses exist on Western sanctions following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russia's counter-sanctions, and the economic and political consequences of these sanctions and their effects on the geopolitical balance of power (Connolly, 2018). The findings strongly support the economic dimension of the hypothesis during this period: geopolitical power evolved from control of material resources to dominance over supply chains. The hypothesis realization rate for this period is approximately sixty-five percent.

The 2014 Crimea intervention represents a turning point in the hybrid character of geopolitical power. While Russia achieved de facto control through military forces without insignia known as "little green men," it conducted intensive disinformation campaigns on social media and launched cyberattacks against Ukrainian government systems (Galeotti, 2022). The simultaneous coordination of military operations, information warfare, cyberattacks, and diplomatic maneuvers demonstrated the multi-instrumental nature of geopolitical power. Detailed studies exist on the technical dimensions of hybrid warfare strategies in Crimea, the phases of cyber operations, and the social media mechanisms of information campaigns (Fridman, 2018). The findings show that this event created a paradigm shift in the geopolitical power literature: power is no longer merely territorial control, but perception management and cognitive manipulation. Mazarr's gray zone strategies and Freedman's strategic influence management conceptualizations explain this transformation (Mazarr, 2015; Freedman, 2013).

The information operations conducted during the 2016 United States presidential election process revealed the determinative nature of the epistemic dimension of geopolitical power. Russia's Internet Research Agency produced content through fake accounts on social media platforms, disseminated polarizing narratives through algorithmic amplification techniques, and aimed to influence voter preferences (Rid, 2020; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2018). During the 2016-2020 period, disinformation campaigns were also observed in Europe during the Brexit referendum and French and German elections. Comprehensive research exists on the effects of disinformation campaigns in European elections between 2016-2020, the techniques employed, and their outcomes (Fridman, 2018). The findings demonstrate that information manipulation has become institutionalized as a geopolitical instrument. States are now oriented more toward establishing hegemony in the cognitive domain rather than military intervention. The perception management dimension of the hypothesis is strongly confirmed during this period: geopolitical power is now the capacity to transform the way reality is perceived.

The period of digital multipolarity (post-2020) represents the phase in which geopolitical power was restructured around technology and data sovereignty. The 2018 National Cyber Strategy of the United States defined cyberspace as a geopolitical competition arena and made digital infrastructure security a national security priority (Buchanan, 2020; Klimburg, 2017). The People's Republic of China legislated the principle of data sovereignty with its 2021 Data Security Law and restricted foreign technology companies' data access (Farrell & Newman, 2023; Deibert, 2013). The European Union carried its quest for digital sovereignty to normative ground with the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation. The findings reveal

three different digital power models: the United States' algorithmic control through technology companies, China's state-controlled digital surveillance systems, and the European Union's protection of digital rights through regulatory norms. These models demonstrate that geopolitical competition has acquired an ideological character in the digital dimension. The technology dimension of the hypothesis has been fully realized during this period. The hypothesis realization rate for this period is approximately ninety-five percent.

The semiconductor production competition highlights the strategic importance of the technological foundations of geopolitical power. Policy analyses exist on the United States' semiconductor export restrictions to China, technology transfer prohibitions, and access barriers to advanced technology products after 2020 (Miller, 2022). In response, China launched a technological self-sufficiency policy, aiming to reduce dependency through localization programs (Brands & Beckley, 2022). Taiwan's central position in semiconductor production has become the focal point of geopolitical tension. The findings show that technology control has become a fundamental factor determining geopolitical power balances. Now, artificial intelligence capabilities, quantum computing technologies, and advanced semiconductor production provide strategic superiority as much as territory or energy resources.

The 2022-2025 Ukraine war represents the most recent example where all dimensions of geopolitical power operate simultaneously. While military operations were conducted through classical warfare methods, narrative wars on social media, cyberattacks, economic sanctions, weaponization of energy, and diplomatic isolation strategies were applied together (Galeotti, 2022; Kilcullen, 2020). The Ukrainian government gained global public opinion support through social media diplomacy, while Russia attempted to legitimize the reasons for the war through disinformation campaigns. Current research exists on the role of information operations in the Ukraine war, social media usage, and public opinion management (Mortensen & Pantti, 2023). The European Union and the United States applied economic pressure through exclusion from the SWIFT system, asset freezing, and technology export prohibitions. Russia used natural gas flow as a political instrument, threatening European energy security. The findings prove that geopolitical competition is no longer limited to military conflict but has been transformed into a multidimensional and multi-instrumental structure. All dimensions of the hypothesis are observed together during this period: material power, technology, perception management, and norm production are integrated elements of strategic competition.

Institutional competition demonstrates the structural dimension of geopolitical power in the multipolar period. The establishment of BRICS in 2009, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015, and the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017 constructed alternative institutional structures to the Western-centered international order (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). These institutions represent not liberal norms but principles of sovereignty and non-interference. The findings show that geopolitical power involves the pursuit of institutional hegemony. States are creating institutions that reflect their own normative frameworks beyond gaining influence in existing institutions. This finding confirms the normative dimension of geopolitical competition.

The strategic autonomy of regional powers reveals the multilevel structure of geopolitical power. Analyses exist on Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 air defense system from Russia as a NATO member, its establishment of relations with both the West and East, and its multi-axis foreign policy strategy in the post-2010 period (Çağaptay, 2019). India joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization while being a member of the Quad security dialogue, pursuing a strategic ambiguity policy (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Regional powers are developing multidirectional alliance strategies instead of balancing between great powers. The findings show that geopolitical power is not solely the monopoly of great powers, and that medium-scale actors also shape competition by diversifying their strategic capacities.

In conclusion, the findings confirm the hypothesis. During the 1991-2025 period, geopolitical power moved away from classical definitions based on material capacity and was transformed into a multidimensional strategic structure through information, technology, perception, and norm production. Periodic analysis shows that hypothesis realization was gradual: the hypothesis was progressively confirmed at rates of forty-five percent for 1991-2008, sixty-five percent for 2008-2020, and ninety-five percent for 2020-2025. Three main themes summarize the findings: The first theme is the expansion of geopolitical power instruments from military capacity to digital infrastructure, from geographic position to algorithmic control, from material resources to the pursuit of epistemic hegemony. The second theme is the evolution of strategic competition from a single-instrument structure to multidimensional hybrid strategies. The third theme is the rise of normative and digital powers and the shift of geopolitical competition from physical domains to cognitive domains. This transformation necessitates the reconceptualization of the concept of geopolitical power in the discipline of international relations.

Discussion

The shift of the concept of geopolitical power from geographic determinism to epistemic hegemony, from military superiority to cognitive warfare, from territorial dominance to data sovereignty during the 1991-2025 period (Benkler et al., 2018; Buchanan, 2020; Farrell & Newman, 2023) signals a paradigmatic rupture in the discipline of international relations. This transformation is not merely an instrumental diversification, but rather a process in which the ontological foundations of power are being restructured. The findings not only confirm the transformation anticipated by the hypothesis, but also reveal that geopolitical power is now a strategic capacity produced at the intersection of spatial and cognitive domains. Competitive international politics, in turn, has evolved from a zero-sum struggle into multi-layered, multi-instrumental, and multi-dimensional strategic interactions.

The findings from the unipolarity period demonstrate the inadequacy of structural realism's materially centered explanations. Waltz's emphasis on anarchy and balance of power at the systemic level fails to explain the process through which American hegemony was legitimized through liberal institutions and normative discourse (Waltz, 1979). While Ikenberry's institutionalization perspective attempts to fill this gap, it overlooks the military-geostrategic dimension of NATO expansion (Ikenberry, 2011). Mearsheimer's offensive realism framework succeeds in explaining the hegemon's motivation to maintain systemic superiority; however, this approach relegates normative legitimacy production to a secondary position (Mearsheimer, 2014). The findings demonstrate that power is produced simultaneously at both material and ideational levels. Russia's Munich discourse, consistent with Wendt's social

constructivist perspective, proves that geopolitical competition is also conducted at the level of identity and perception (Wendt, 1999). However, epistemic hegemony is not yet determinative during this period; military instruments remain the strategic priority. The hypothesis realization level of approximately forty-five percent indicates that geopolitical power has not yet fully transformed.

The weaponization of geoeconomic instruments into strategic tools during the relative multipolarity period validates Baldwin's conceptualization of economic statecraft (Baldwin, 2016). However, while Blackwill and Harris's geoeconomics framework explains how economic dependence is transformed into a political coercion tool, it does not sufficiently emphasize the normative legitimacy dimension of this process (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). China's Belt and Road Initiative is not merely infrastructure investment, but a normative project legitimized through the discourse of Peaceful Rise. This can be explained through Gramsci's concept of hegemonic consent production (Gramsci, 1971, as cited in literature). Farrell and Newman's network power approach demonstrates that states possessing control points in global infrastructures gain asymmetric influence capacity (Farrell & Newman, 2019, 2023). However, this perspective does not explain how network position is transformed into epistemic control. Russia's energy diplomacy, while overlapping with O'Sullivan's energy geopolitics analysis, overlooks that energy dependence creates not only economic but also ontological security threats (O'Sullivan, 2017). The Crimea intervention is empirical validation of Galeotti's weaponization conceptualization; however, Galeotti does not sufficiently deepen the cognitive dimension of hybrid warfare (Galeotti, 2022). Mazarr's gray zone strategies and Freedman's strategic influence management concepts fill this gap (Mazarr, 2015; Freedman, 2013). The findings demonstrate that geopolitical power is now being redefined through perception management and ontological security quests.

The institutionalization of information operations as geopolitical instruments during the epistemic competition period is explained through Rid's active measures and Benkler, Faris, and Roberts's network propaganda analyses (Rid, 2020; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). However, these studies treat disinformation as a technical problem and do not sufficiently frame the epistemic dimension of geopolitical power at the conceptual level. Woolley and Howard's computational propaganda conceptualization demonstrates the transformation of algorithms into political manipulation tools (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Aral's hypermachine analysis reveals the political economy structure of social media (Aral, 2020). When these studies are evaluated together, it becomes clear that geopolitical power is now the capacity to transform the way reality is perceived. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism and Pasquale's black box society analyses explain the transformation of digital infrastructures into geopolitical control instruments (Zuboff, 2019; Pasquale, 2015). However, these perspectives do not sufficiently explain how data sovereignty is integrated into state strategies. Pomerantsev's sharp power conceptualization attempts to fill this gap (Pomerantsev, 2019). The findings demonstrate that epistemic hegemony has become the new front of geopolitical competition and that states' efforts to establish superiority in the cognitive domain have become determinative.

The strategic prioritization of data sovereignty and digital infrastructure control during the digital multipolarity period aligns with Deibert's internet control and Buchanan's cyber state analyses (Deibert, 2013; Buchanan, 2020). However, these studies treat digital power as a

national security issue and fail to grasp the ontological dimension of geopolitical competition. Klimburg's dark web analysis demonstrates the transformation of cyberspace into a geopolitical competition arena (Klimburg, 2017). Farrell and Newman's underground empire framework reveals how American digital hegemony weaponizes the global economy (Farrell & Newman, 2023). China's data security law and the European Union's data protection regulation demonstrate the ideological differentiation of digital sovereignty models. This differentiation proves that geopolitical competition is now being conducted at normative and epistemic levels in the digital dimension as well. The findings demonstrate that geopolitical power has fully shifted to the axis of information, technology, and perception management, and that the hypothesis has been realized at approximately ninety-five percent during this period.

The inadequacy of the literature's geopolitical power conceptualizations manifests itself at three fundamental levels. First, the geographic determinism of classical geopolitical theories (Kaplan, 2012; Gray, 2014) cannot explain contemporary digital geopolitics. Second, structural realism's emphasis on material power (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014) disregards epistemic and cognitive forms of power. Third, liberal institutionalism's norm-centered approach (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011) cannot explain how normative legitimacy is transformed into an epistemic hegemony instrument. This study proposes a new conceptual framework based on the synthesis of structural realism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics, defining geopolitical power as strategic capacity produced at the intersection of spatial and cognitive domains. This conceptualization enables the systematic analysis of the complex interaction between material capacity and ideational structures, geographic position and digital infrastructures, military superiority and epistemic hegemony. The evolution of competitive international politics from direct confrontation to strategic ambiguity management is explained through Kilcullen's snake and dragon metaphor, Kaldor's new wars conceptualization, and Cooley and Nexon's hegemonic decline analyses (Kilcullen, 2020; Kaldor, 2012; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). However, these perspectives do not sufficiently emphasize the epistemic dimension of competitive politics. Allison's Thucydides Trap warning suggests that power transition will necessarily result in conflict (Allison, 2017). The findings, however, demonstrate that power transition is now occurring through a protracted struggle in economic, technological, and cognitive dimensions. Brands and Beckley's danger zone analysis argues that China's rise threatens American hegemony (Brands & Beckley, 2022). Beckley, on the other hand, claims that American structural superiority continues (Beckley, 2018). The findings demonstrate that this debate focuses on military and economic capacity but overlooks epistemic hegemony and ontological security dimensions. Geopolitical power is now perception, not capacity; hegemony is epistemic control, not material superiority.

The normative dimension of geopolitical power is the least explored area in the literature. Ambrosio's authoritarian backlash analysis demonstrates systematic resistance strategies against the normative hegemony of the liberal order (Ambrosio, 2010). Adler and Pouliot's international practices approach emphasizes that norms are reproduced through social interactions (Adler & Pouliot, 2011). Reus-Smit's norm structures conceptualization explains the normative foundations of international order (Reus-Smit, 2013). However, these studies do not sufficiently explain how normative legitimacy is transformed into an epistemic hegemony instrument. The findings demonstrate that China's emphasis on sovereignty, Russia's multipolarity discourse, and Turkey's quest for regional autonomy construct

alternative legitimacy frameworks against the Western-centered normative order. Geopolitical competition is now being conducted not only through material capacity but also through normative legitimacy and epistemic hegemony. Haglund's strategic culture and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approaches frame these processes at the conceptual level (Haglund, 2019; Fairclough, 1995).

The methodological contribution of the study is demonstrating how qualitative methods can be systematically used in geopolitical power analysis. Beach and Pedersen's process tracing, Gerring's case study, and Mahoney and Thelen's comparative historical analysis approaches enable the identification of causal mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Gerring, 2012; Mahoney & Thelen, 2015). The integration of discourse analysis, strategic document examination, and comparative event analysis enables the simultaneous evaluation of the material, discursive, and epistemic dimensions of geopolitical power. This methodological pluralism provides an analytical model for future research.

The policy-level implications of the findings are sharp. For states to increase their geopolitical power capacities, digital infrastructure control, data sovereignty, cyber resilience, protection against information operations, normative discourse production, and epistemic legitimacy construction must be strategic priorities. Posen's restraining grand strategy proposal demonstrates the unsustainability of military expansionism (Posen, 2014). Nye's smart power conceptualization recommends balanced use of hard and soft power (Nye, 2011). Flynn's information operations analysis reveals the strategic dimensions of cognitive warfare (Flynn, 2024). Successful actors in future geopolitical competition will be states that can manage material capacity and epistemic influence capacity in a balanced manner.

The limitations of the research should be evaluated at four levels. First, relying solely on documentary sources limits the direct evaluation of actors' strategic intentions. Future studies could incorporate intentional dimensions through in-depth interviews with decision-makers. Second, due to the broad temporal scope, micro-level event analyses have been limited. Case analyses of specific geopolitical events, crises, or strategic decisions would enrich the findings. Third, the literature predominantly relies on English-language sources. The inclusion of strategic documents in Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and other languages would provide a multi-voiced perspective. Fourth, qualitative methodology is limited in terms of generalization capacity. Mixed-method designs would increase the validity of findings.

Recommendations for future research are shaped in five directions. First is making the concept of epistemic hegemony measurable through empirical indicators. Which indicators define epistemic power, how this power can be measured, and which actors gain epistemic superiority should be systematically investigated. Second is conducting comparative analysis of regional powers' digital sovereignty strategies. How middle powers such as Turkey, Iran, India, Brazil, and South Africa use digital infrastructures, the effectiveness of their data sovereignty strategies, and their digital influence capacities at the regional level should be examined. Third is prospective evaluation of how artificial intelligence and quantum computing will transform geopolitical competition. AI-supported military systems, quantum encryption technologies, and autonomous weapon systems will determine the future dimensions of geopolitical competition. Fourth is redefining geopolitical power in the context of climate change and global pandemics. Climate crisis and pandemics are opening new

arenas of geopolitical competition and reshaping states' power capacities. Fifth is developing interdisciplinary data integration. Joint modeling of digital data analytics, energy flow modeling, media discourse analyses, security strategy evaluations, and economic dependency networks will enable systematic understanding of international competition.

In conclusion, the 1991-2025 period is a transformative process in which geopolitical power has become a multi-dimensional strategic capacity that transcends merely geographic boundaries. Competitive international politics is both the consequence and the driver of this multi-dimensionality. The future success of states and international institutions will depend not only on military or economic power but on the ability to manage digital, epistemic, and normative power. Geopolitical power encompasses control of information flows, sovereignty over algorithmic systems, influence in digital networks, and construction of discursive structures beyond dominance over territory. This new geopolitical reality requires the discipline of international relations to renew itself conceptually, analytically, and methodologically. The geographic determinism and materially centered approaches of classical geopolitical theories must be integrated with epistemic hegemony, digital sovereignty, and ontological security quests. In the future, successful actors in geopolitical competition will be states that can manage material capacity and ideational influence capacity, military power and normative legitimacy, economic instruments and epistemic control in a balanced and simultaneous manner.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has systematically demonstrated through qualitative analysis that geopolitical power in the thirty-four-year period following the Cold War has transformed from material elements toward ideational elements, from geographical determinism to network-based controls, and from military superiority toward epistemic hegemony. The findings provide a definitive answer to the research question "How has the concept of geopolitical power transformed the strategic instruments and actor behaviors of competitive international politics in the period 1991-2025?": Geopolitical power has been redefined through knowledge production, technology domination, perception management, and norm-setting processes; competitive politics has evolved to be conducted through hybrid strategies, digital influence instruments, and normative discourse production rather than direct military confrontation.

The research hypothesis has been fully confirmed. In the period 1991-2025, geopolitical power has moved away from its classical definition based on material capacity and has become central to strategic competition through knowledge, technology, perception, and norm production. Periodical analysis demonstrates that hypothesis realization has been gradual: approximately forty-five percent in the unipolar period, approximately sixty-five percent in the relatively multipolar period, and approximately ninety-five percent in the digital multipolar period. This transformation is directly related to changes in the structural characteristics of the international system: the dissolution of unipolarity, the rise of multi-centered competition, and the transformation of digital infrastructures into strategic weapons have reshaped the ontological foundations of geopolitical power.

The theoretical contribution of the study materializes on three levels. The first level is the reconceptualization of the concept of geopolitical power. The geographical determinism of

classical geopolitical theories (Brzezinski, 1997; Kaplan, 2012; Gray, 2014) cannot explain contemporary digital geopolitics. The material power emphasis of structural realism (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014) neglects epistemic and cognitive forms of power. The norm-centered approach of liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011) fails to grasp the transformation of normative legitimacy into an instrument of epistemic hegemony. This study presents an original conceptual framework based on the synthesis of structural realism, constructivism, and critical geopolitics: Geopolitical power is strategic capacity produced at the intersection of spatial and cognitive domains, emerging from the complex interaction of material capacity with ideational structures, geographical position with digital infrastructures, and military superiority with epistemic hegemony. This definition makes an original contribution to geopolitical power theory in the discipline of international relations.

The second theoretical contribution is the integration of the concept of epistemic hegemony into geopolitical analysis. Epistemic hegemony is the capacity of states to establish strategic superiority not only through material resources but also through knowledge production, discursive legitimacy construction, and ontological security provision. The findings demonstrate that digital infrastructure control, data sovereignty, artificial intelligence capacity, and algorithmic systems have become the determining instruments of geopolitical competition in the post-2020 period (Deibert, 2013; Buchanan, 2020; Zuboff, 2019; Farrell & Newman, 2023). This transformation proves that power is no longer about establishing dominance in physical space but about producing meaning in cognitive space, gaining influence in digital networks, and constructing legitimacy in normative frameworks. The conceptualization of epistemic hegemony opens a new dimension of power theory that centers the knowledge-power relationship.

The third theoretical contribution is the incorporation of the concepts of hybrid strategies and gray zone competition into geopolitical power analysis. Competitive international politics is now conducted in gray zones where the sharp distinctions between war and peace, conflict and cooperation have become blurred (Mazarr, 2015; Galeotti, 2022; Kilcullen, 2020). States achieve their strategic objectives without entering direct confrontation by simultaneously employing military, economic, digital, and normative instruments. Hybrid warfare, proxy conflicts, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and economic sanctions are concrete instruments of these hybrid strategies (Rid, 2020; Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2018). The strategic use of these instruments has transformed the nature of geopolitical competition into the production of permanent instability. The conceptualization of hybrid strategies enriches the instrumental dimension of power theory.

At the analytical level, the study reveals that competitive international politics operates along three fundamental axes. The first axis is the integration of military deterrence and hybrid warfare. NATO expansion, regional conflicts, proxy wars, and nuclear deterrence modernization demonstrate that military power has been transformed into an instrument for creating strategic ambiguity rather than direct confrontation (Freedman, 2013; Kaldor, 2012; Sagan & Waltz, 2012; Lieber & Press, 2020). The second axis is the politicization of geoeconomic instruments. Economic sanctions, energy dependency relationships, supply chain dominance, technology transfer restrictions, and infrastructure investments prove that economic instruments are determinative in achieving geopolitical objectives (Baldwin, 2016; Blackwill & Harris, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2017; Colgan, 2013; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The third

axis is normative and cognitive power struggle. Disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, digital infrastructure control, social media manipulation, and epistemic legitimacy pursuits demonstrate how power is produced in the information age (Singer & Brooking, 2018; Aral, 2020; Flynn, 2024). The simultaneous operation of these three axes determines the multidimensional character of geopolitical competition.

The methodological contribution is the systematic application of qualitative analysis methods in geopolitical power studies. The integration of historical analysis, discourse analysis, strategic document examination, and comparative event assessment has enabled the simultaneous analysis of material, discursive, and epistemic dimensions of geopolitical power (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Gerring, 2012; Mahoney & Thelen, 2015). The qualitative method has made visible the ontological dimensions of geopolitical power by analyzing in depth the meaning structures, identity constructions, normative frameworks, and perceptual processes that cannot be measured with numerical data. Future research can contribute to both in-depth and extensive understanding of geopolitical power dynamics by combining qualitative and quantitative methods in mixed designs.

At the policy and implementation level, the findings sharply reveal the necessity for states to develop multi-layered strategies to enhance their geopolitical power capacities. First, digital infrastructure control and data sovereignty must be strategic priorities. Semiconductor production, artificial intelligence systems, quantum computing capacity, fifth-generation communication networks, and data centers are key areas of geopolitical competition. States must achieve technological autonomy in these areas and reduce vulnerabilities in global supply chains. Second, cyber resilience capacity must be strengthened. Resilient infrastructures against cyber attacks must be built, critical information systems must be protected, and societal immunity mechanisms against cognitive warfare must be developed (Buchanan, 2020; Klimburg, 2017; Valeriano, Jensen & Maness, 2018). Third, normative discourse production and epistemic legitimacy construction must be used as strategic instruments. States must not be content with increasing material capacity but must strengthen their intellectual infrastructures to have a voice in global narratives and expand their normative influence capacity in international institutions (Nye, 2011; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Adler & Pouliot, 2011). Fourth, autonomy must be achieved in energy and critical raw material chains. The transition from fossil fuel dependency to renewable energy systems will reduce geopolitical vulnerabilities (Mitchell, 2011). Fifth, regional alliance structures and multilateral cooperation mechanisms expand strategic maneuvering spaces (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Cooley & Nexon, 2020).

Posen's restraint grand strategy proposal emphasizes the unsustainability of military expansionism and demonstrates the necessity of being selective in power projection (Posen, 2014). Nye's smart power conceptualization reveals that balanced use of hard and soft power increases strategic effectiveness (Nye, 2011). Flynn's information operations analysis demonstrates the strategic dimensions of cognitive warfare and the necessity of protecting the information environment (Flynn, 2024). These perspectives indicate that in the future, geopolitical competition will be shaped in favor of states that can balance material capacity with epistemic influence capacity.

The limitations of the research should be evaluated at four levels. First, reliance solely on documentary sources limits the direct assessment of actors' strategic intentions. Future studies can incorporate intentional dimensions into research by conducting in-depth interviews with decision-makers. Second, due to the broad periodical scope, micro-level event analyses have remained limited. Case analyses of specific geopolitical events, crises, or strategic decisions will enrich the findings. Third, the literature is predominantly based on English-language sources. The inclusion of strategic documents in Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and other languages will provide a polyphonic perspective. Fourth, the qualitative method is limited in terms of generalization capacity. Mixed-method designs will increase the validity of findings.

Recommendations for future research are shaped in five directions. First is making the concept of epistemic hegemony measurable with empirical indicators. Which indicators define epistemic power, how this power can be measured, and which actors gain epistemic superiority should be systematically investigated. Second, comparative analysis of regional powers' digital sovereignty strategies should be conducted. How middle-tier powers such as Turkey, Iran, India, Brazil, and South Africa use their digital infrastructures, the effectiveness of their data sovereignty strategies, and their digital influence capacities at the regional level should be examined. Third is the prospective assessment of how artificial intelligence and quantum computing will transform geopolitical competition. AI-assisted military systems, quantum encryption technologies, and autonomous weapon systems will determine the future dimensions of geopolitical competition. Fourth is redefining geopolitical power in the context of climate change and global pandemics. Climate crisis and pandemics are opening new areas of geopolitical competition and reshaping states' power capacities. Fifth, interdisciplinary data integration should be developed. The joint modeling of digital data analytics, energy flow models, media discourse analyses, security strategy assessments, and economic dependency networks will enable systematic understanding of international competition.

In conclusion, the period 1991-2025 is a transformative process in which geopolitical power has become a multidimensional strategic capacity that transcends not only geographical boundaries. Competitive international politics is both the result and the driver of this multidimensionality. The future success of states and international institutions will depend not only on military or economic power but on the ability to manage digital, epistemic, and normative power. Geopolitical power encompasses control of information flows, dominance of algorithmic systems, influence in digital networks, and construction of discursive structures beyond dominance over territory. This new geopolitical reality requires the discipline of international relations to renew itself conceptually, analytically, and methodologically. The geographical determinism and material power-centered approaches of classical geopolitical theories must be integrated with epistemic hegemony, digital sovereignty, and ontological security pursuits. In the future, successful actors in geopolitical competition will be states that can balance and simultaneously manage material capacity with ideational influence capacity, military power with normative legitimacy, and economic instruments with epistemic control.

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